

# SYMAT and STAR Merger Proposal Engagement Parent/Carer & Community

## Comments, Questions and Answers

**Below is a summary of questions and answers which were raised during the engagement information meetings, via email or by utilising the online feedback form, both before and after the meetings. Where similar questions have been asked, these have been summarised into one reply below.**

**Q1- Do parents get a vote on the decision? If the majority of parents were against the proposal, would that make a difference?**

A- Whilst there is no vote for our stakeholders on the merger, trustees would not want to go against the opinion of the majority. However, the outcome of this process has shown that stakeholders are broadly supportive of moving forward with the application to the DfE. Additionally, the feedback received during the engagement period has been invaluable and will play an important role in shaping the next steps of the merger process. A comprehensive communication plan will be implemented to ensure stakeholders remain informed and engaged as the process moves forward.

**Q2 – My experience in primary schools is that teachers are exchangeable in Multi Academy Trusts. Will this be the case?**

A – Staff will not be rotated between schools as part of the merger. Each school will retain its staff to ensure continuity for students and maintain the relationships that are key to their development and wellbeing.

The merger may create new professional development and career progression opportunities for both teaching and support staff within the trust. These opportunities are designed to support staff retention and enhance expertise across all schools. Any movement of staff between schools would only occur if it aligns with their career aspirations and in the best interest of both the staff member(s) and the schools involved.

The trust remains committed to ensuring that students experience consistency in their educational environment, with familiar and dedicated staff who understand their individual needs.

**Q3 - By September 26, what would be the key indicators that the merger was successful?**

A - The success of the merger will be measured by the creation of an organisation that enables children to thrive. Key performance indicators will include the use of published government benchmarking tools on [Compare School and College Performance in England](#) to evaluate the

trust's overall success, alongside the monitoring of school improvement plans by Local Governing Bodies (LGBs) and the Trust Board.

Visible improvements across various areas, including academic outcomes, will be closely scrutinised to ensure progress and impact. The financial strength of the trust will be an important indicator, with a focus on maintaining stability, achieving efficiencies, and reinvesting savings into schools to support students and staff.

In addition, student attendance will be a vital measure including the reduction in the number of persistently and severely absent students, reflecting the trust's ability to create engaging and supportive learning environments. Staff attendance will also be monitored to assess morale, wellbeing, and the effectiveness of staff support systems.

Feedback gathered through surveys, including staff, parent and student voices, will provide valuable insights into the experiences of the school community and help shape further improvements. This engagement will ensure that the trust remains responsive to the needs of its stakeholders.

The overarching goal is to establish a robust framework that allows all schools to become outstanding environments where students can learn, grow, achieve and flourish.

#### Q4 - What would change for Fulford to allow the school to improve rather than just remain as it is?

A – Fulford is already an outstanding school, that remains focussed on further improvement. The merger would enable it to work more collaboratively with peers across a larger trust. This collaboration will help address areas for development, creating more opportunities to share resources and best practices that can drive continuous improvement.

#### Q5- Can you talk about the financial due diligence that has taken place in preparation for the merger?

A - An open and transparent due diligence process has been conducted between both trusts with the support of an independent and experienced academy finance consultant. This process involved the comprehensive sharing of financial information across all areas, ensuring a thorough understanding of each trust's financial position.

A detailed report has been provided to trustees, enabling them to make an informed decision about proceeding with the application to the DfE. The report outlines key risks, opportunities, and future recommendations, ensuring that all aspects of financial sustainability are carefully considered.

## Q6 – Can you provide information on the top slice? Will the top slice schools pay change?

A – All schools, whether part of a Multi-Academy Trust or under local authority control contribute to central and support services. Currently, both SYMAT and STAR MAT charge a top slice of between 5 and 6.2% and maintaining this rate is the aspiration moving forward.

However, if additional services are introduced to the central offer, the top slice may increase. In such a scenario, the costs for these services would no longer be procured direct by schools individually but would instead be covered by the centralised provision. This approach ensures that the overall impact on school budgets remains neutral, as the service cost would simply be paid through a different mechanism.

## Q7 - The economies of scale—does that involve procuring external services or merging central services?

A - Economies of scale will come from a combination of procuring external services and merging some central departments and roles across the new trust. This consolidation will result in efficiencies without any planned redundancies. A wider workforce will also bring more opportunities to share expertise and resources.

## Q8 - What are the risks and advantages of staying as we are?

A cost-effective trust is generally considered to have over 7,500 students and without the merger, both trusts risk becoming unsustainable and may be directed into a merger with a less like-minded trust. There is a nervousness that doing nothing is not an option and we want to constantly evolve and improve providing the very best opportunities for children and staff. By staying as we are opportunities for growth, collaboration, and the benefits of a more robust trust structure may be missed, potentially impacting long-term viability and educational outcomes.

Advantages and opportunities include possible expansion of the curriculum or access to specialists we currently do not have available to us. There will be greater scope for enhanced CPD and career development for example a middle leader wanting to take a step into school leadership and be an Assistant Headteacher may not be possible for some time. More schools will mean more opportunity within the same organisation, therefore supporting staff retention.

The merger will also create efficiencies through economies of scale, allowing for cost savings in areas such as procurement and service delivery. Increased bargaining power as a larger organisation will further enhance the ability to negotiate better deals, ensuring that resources are utilised more effectively to benefit all schools within the trust.

## Q9 – What do you mean by growing the curriculum?

A – Growing the curriculum means expanding the provision and experiences available to students. For instance, it could involve creating opportunities for subjects and activities that are currently difficult to deliver at some of the schools, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Gold

Award or A-level German. It could also mean the opportunity for interactive student work such as a trust climate conference or a shared student council. The aim is to broaden the educational offerings for all students within the trust at both our primary and secondary schools.

#### Q10 - Will there be forced curriculum changes? Will schools teach the same content across the trust?

A - There is no intention to enforce uniformity across curriculums. Schools will retain autonomy to design curriculums that reflect the needs of their communities. The trust will encourage collaborative sharing of best practice while maintaining a rigorous oversight of quality assurance processes.

#### Q11- What does a larger MAT mean for education opportunities?

A - A larger MAT would allow for more enrichment opportunities, such as cross-school activities and student leadership events across both primary and secondary phases. A more efficient funding model could then enable a broader range of extra-curricular and 'non-traditional' curriculum activities, which would help engage students who might otherwise struggle with traditional learning environments. Additionally, a larger trust would have greater influence with employers, creating more opportunities for work-related experiences for students.

#### Q12 – Will the sixth forms collaborate?

A – The consortium sixth form approach between Tadcaster Grammar School and Sherburn High at STAR has been in place for many years, successfully allowing students from both of these schools to benefit from a wide-ranging subject choice alongside pastoral continuity by having their same 'home school.' As it stands and as we enter merger there is no plan to widen the consortium to include Fulford into this offer. Fulford school is currently full and as such there is no gain from additional capacity to be shared. However, we do recognise that as our new organisation develops over time, some students may logically choose to apply to a new Trust home school for their sixth form. As always with such important years as 12 and 13 any changes which may happen in the future will be planned and communicated well in advance and with continuity of provision for those already part of the sixth form absolutely as a top priority.

#### Q13 - Is there an opportunity for the new Targeted Mainstream Provision (TMP) to grow into secondary provision?

A – Not at this time. The two new TMP offer is not looking to expand into secondary provision and will continue to focus on primary pupil need. Each new TMP goes through a robust assessment process with the DfE – they cannot simply be expanded. However, the trust plans to collaborate with Wellspring Academy Trust on the development of the new Selby free school to provide additional SEND places in the region.

#### Q14 - What is the target number of students for financial stability, and for how long would it remain stable?

A - The Department for Education has set 7,500 students as the benchmark for financial stability. Achieving this number would help make the trust more resilient to future changes and ensure its long-term sustainability.

#### Q15- What does a big MAT look like?

A- MATs vary greatly in size and ethos. For example, United Learning Trust is a large trust with 90 schools, operating in clusters across the country, while single academy trusts are at the opposite end of the spectrum. Each trust's ethos and approach to collaboration can differ significantly. Currently, the majority of MATs across the country have fewer than 10 schools in them. Further detail can be found here:

[List\\_of\\_open\\_academies\\_free\\_schools\\_studio\\_schools\\_and\\_UTCs\\_and\\_academy\\_projects\\_in\\_development\\_-\\_October\\_2024.xlsx](#)

#### Q16 – What will be the impact of large growth on the trust?

A – Growth brings potential risks, such as cultural changes resulting from merging two organisations. However, pre and post-integration planning is already in place to mitigate these risks and ensure a stable transition. While neither trust can currently grow organically, merging as like-minded trusts aligns the ethos and goals of both organisations.

#### Q17 - How will collaboration among secondaries work? Will it be positive?

A - Secondary schools will benefit from the same collaboration already seen among SYMAT's primary schools and both the primary and secondary schools at STAR, but on a wider scale. For example, Fulford would gain from sharing resources, expertise and best practice with the other secondary schools in the trust. Existing partnerships with other trusts will also continue to enhance collaboration. All three of our secondary schools are significantly above national averages for student progress and have a lot to share.

#### Q18 - How will the Diocese be involved in the merger?

A - As church schools are involved, the Diocese of York must approve the merger. Both Trust Boards and the DfE also need to provide their approval before the merger can proceed. Once we received approval to merge the Trusts would work with the Diocese to ensure that governance and compliance structures are in place for our Church schools that protect their Christian foundation / values whilst working alongside our secular schools.

#### Q19 - The engagement process feels very hurried. Why was that?

A- While the engagement process may have a short turnaround, discussions about the possibility of merging both trusts have been ongoing for some time. Once trustees decided to move forward and submit an application to the DfE, it was crucial to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to engage as quickly as possible.

The timing of the engagement period was carefully considered to align with the DfE deadlines and the upcoming Christmas holidays, ensuring stakeholders could participate meaningfully in the process. Engagement with stakeholders will continue beyond the initial engagement period and will be ongoing throughout 2025.

#### Q20 – How will the merger impact the school and staff?

A – When the merger takes effect, there will be no immediate changes to the day-to-day activities of staff or students. There is likely to be some adjustment to align systems and processes across the new trust, but not all will be in place on day one and instead will be introduced gradually and thoughtfully to ensure a smooth transition.

The most noticeable impact for staff and students will be the increased opportunities for collaboration and the sharing of best practices across all schools within the trust. This enhanced collaboration will further drive school improvement and provide enriched learning and professional development experiences for everyone involved.

#### Q21 - How will new structure look for governors, senior leadership teams and individual management of schools and how will this be different from the current trust structures?

A – The current position being proposed is that the Trust will have one group of Members and one Board of Directors, with the Diocese represented on both. Supporting committee structures will be in place including Education, Church Schools, Finance, and Audit and Risk. Local governance is pivotal and central to the application and will remain in place across all schools and will sustain parent and staff involvement.

As it stands there have been no discussions about changing structures at individual schools. The only difference currently being explored is what the central team structure will look like when bringing the two current organisations together.

#### Q22- Will the merger increase funding for schools in both trusts?

A- The General Annual Grant (GAG) funding per student will remain the same, as it is set by the Department for Education. However, as a larger trust, there will be greater opportunities to access additional funding streams that may not be available to smaller trusts.

The merger will also create efficiencies through economies of scale, allowing for cost savings in areas such as procurement and service delivery. Increased bargaining power as a larger organisation will further enhance the ability to negotiate better deals, ensuring that resources are utilised more effectively to benefit all schools within the trust.

## Q23 – What benefits will each trust bring to each other?

A – The proposed new Trust creates a Trust of three secondary and 14 primary schools. All schools will be geographically close, ensuring collaboration remains central to our work. The Trust aims to make a difference in our communities by prioritising learning. Of the 17 partner schools, one is outstanding, one requires improvement, with strong progress being made and all others are good. We are confident in our capacity and structures for School Improvement. A key strength is the combination of three strong secondary schools, harnessing their expertise.

Collaboration is already evident within both organisations and has been enhanced during pre-merger activities. We also have a history of working positively with other Trusts, local authorities, charities, and businesses, reflecting our community focus. Our shared values— aspiration, inclusion, collaboration, and integrity—will enable us to share best practices and further improve outcomes.

Inclusion remains our guiding principle, ensuring provision evolves to meet the needs of students and families. By September 2024, we plan to establish three resource bases across the Trust, developing staff expertise.

The Trust aims to become a regional centre of excellence, offering exceptional professional development to enhance recruitment, retention, and classroom impact. Staff and student wellbeing will remain central. Both Trusts are financially secure, and the merger will create economies of scale, directing more resources to classrooms. School improvement will remain a key focus, supported by central services.

## Q24 – Will the merger allow more Teaching Assistants to be available in classrooms?

A - All public sector services are experiencing financial challenges. That is why it is important that we create a robust Trust that has a focus on students' attainment and wellbeing. Teaching Assistants play a key role within all our schools, and we will continue to prioritise this important work with the budgetary constraints we work in.

## Q25 - How much does the CEO expect to be remunerated?

A – The CEO's salary will align with the Teachers' Pay Scales for England (Leadership Group), ensuring it is appropriate for the level of responsibility and grade. Additionally, benchmarking will be conducted to ensure that the remuneration for trust leaders is consistent with industry standards and reflective of the scope and demands of their role. Further information can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/setting-executive-salaries-guidance-for-academy-trusts/setting-executive-salaries-guidance-for-academy-trusts>

## Q26 – What are the proposed values of the new trust?

A – Inclusion; Collaboration; Aspiration; Integrity.

## Q28 – Will anything change with admissions and catchment areas?

A – There are no planned changes to admissions arrangements or catchment areas as part of the merger.

## Q29 – Can you share the cost of the merger such as branding and new signage versus the anticipated annual saving?

A – Branding is being managed as part of an existing service level agreement, meaning there are no additional costs associated with this aspect of the merger. There will be one off costs associated to cover things like, legal fees, oversight of TUPE / staff transfers, project management, pensions. Set up costs are currently being worked through and costs being sought and collated to inform final proposals and decision making.

## Q30 - In the current Star trust only a third of schools are religious. In the South Yorks that is two thirds, meaning the new trust will be close to 50:50 secular and religious. This is a significant increase in the power of the church in school matters, indeed they appear to have a deciding say whereas secular schools do not have the same voice. What safeguards are being put in place to ensure one type of school does not exert undue influence on the other and therefore parent choice is maintained? Specifically when bringing together policies across the trust how will the trust ensure that secular schools do not have religion based decisions enforced upon it?

A – The governance structure of the new trust has been carefully designed to ensure balance between secular and religious schools. The new Trust Articles of Association very clearly articulate the requirement to fully preserve the status of both church and secular schools T

The Diocese of York's Church School Oversight Agreement will apply exclusively to church schools within the trust. Policies and decisions related to all schools will be clearly outlined in the Scheme of Delegation (SoD), with separate sections that apply only to the church schools as directed by the Diocese. Secular schools will not be subject to influence from the Diocese, and their secular distinctiveness will be protected.

While the trust's overall values will align with a Christian ethos, these are universal values of Inclusion, Collaboration, Aspiration and Integrity qualities that are relevant and desirable in any educational setting, irrespective of religious affiliation. This approach ensures that all schools retain their unique character and ethos while operating within a framework of mutual respect and collaboration.

## Q31 – What will the new Trust be called?

A – The name of the new Trust will be Yorkshire Learning Trust.